Sheikh Shabtai and Stories from the Jewish Quarter

Maurice Shammas

(Abu Farid)

Stories

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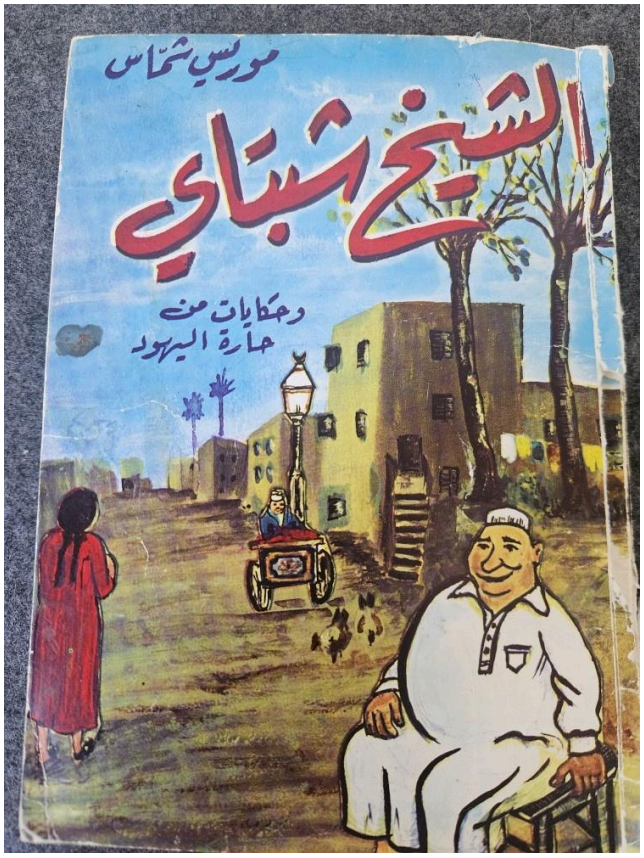

Dedication

To the pioneers of peace...

President Muhammad Anwar El-Sadat, President of the Arab Republic of Egypt,

And Mr. Menachem Begin, Prime Minister of Israel.

I dedicate this collection of stories, with appreciation and pride, for what they have given to their two peoples... and to humanity.

Maurice Shammas

Introduction

In Egypt... and upon the land of the Kinana (the Nile)... Jews have lived since ancient times. The people of Israel did not fuse into a nation with its own distinct characteristics except on the soil of Egypt, and its identity as a unique people crystallized only on the banks of the Nile River.

On the day this people rebelled against slavery and departed from Egypt, led by their prophet Moses (peace be upon him), seeking freedom and the establishment of their state, they carried with them many traits of Egyptian civilization...

Following the collapse of the Israelite state during the era of Emperor Nebuchadnezzar... Egypt opened its doors to receive caravans of Jews displaced from their homeland... and Alexandria became, in one of its eras, a central hub of Jewish thought.

In the Islamic era, a Jewish community lived in Egypt, which soon grew... and flourished... until, by the mid-twentieth century, it became one of the most refined Jewish communities in the East.

The Jewish community gave to Egypt just as much as it took from her... It contributed its share in the fields of thought, science, and economics, producing men whose names are remembered in the evolution of Egyptian culture. Among them we mention: Yaqub Sanua, the founder of theater in Egypt... Dawood Hosni, one of the pioneers of the Egyptian musical renaissance... and Yusuf Qattawi Pasha, who served as Minister of Finance during the reign of King Fuad and had a profound impact on bolstering the foundations of the Egyptian economy during the period when Egypt was taking its first steps toward political independence.

There is no doubt that the Jews of Egypt lived among the Egyptian people as a part of this ancient nation. They drank from the well of its culture... and adopted its morals and traditions...

Perhaps the "Jewish Quarter" (Haret al-Yahud) in Cairo... was the truest model of Jewish assimilation into the authentic Egyptian environment.

The Jew in the Jewish Quarter was an exact replica of the "Ibn al-Balad" (the authentic local) who lives in the popular neighborhoods of Egypt... with all that entails: inner pride, a kind heart... and nobility.

When the Jews left Egypt... no one remained in the Jewish Quarter except for a few dozen elderly and destitute individuals... whom Egypt took under her wing... granting them security and care.

On the day I left Egypt in 1951, I carried with me, alongside my academic certificates, my childhood memories in the Jewish Quarter... with all its characters and events that I lived through, which still live in my heart like the scent of sweet perfume.

Today... after the signing of the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, I felt that it is a duty of loyalty to this generous country and to the history of the Jews of Egypt... to present the reader with this collection of stories and characters that depict one angle of a life that was brimming with exciting facets and dimensions.

It is, therefore, a small "brick" in a massive memorial, which the writers and authors who lived through this period have a duty to help build with their pens... to immortalize the memory of a great Jewish community... that lived... flourished... and whose sun finally set over the land of Egypt.

Chapter 1: Sheikh Shabtai

Somewhere deep in his childhood, an event occurred—known only to the Knower of Secrets—that caused his mental development to halt at the years of infancy. Meanwhile, his body continued to grow with the passage of time until he became a boy, then a young man... and finally, an older man approaching his sixtieth year.

Such was "Shabtai": standing on the threshold of old age, yet looking at life through the eyes of a small child who had not yet surpassed his fourth year.

As if nature wanted to complete the picture, it granted him a child's face, with all the features and traits that implies. His face was round, his eyes wide... his nose small... and his smooth cheeks did not grow a single hair. As for his mouth, it was always parted in a wide smile, carrying the innocence of children... and their frivolity.

His smile never left him for a single moment. He smiled when he walked, smiled when he sat, and smiled when he ate his food. He even smiled while fast asleep, until you would think he was born with that smile already on his lips.

It would have been possible to feel comfortable around him and try to converse with him, if not for that strange smile glued to his face, which made you feel you were in the presence of an unnatural human being, not of the world we live in, but from another world shrouded in secrets and wrapped in mystery.

"Shabtai" never spoke. He never uttered a single word. He was perpetually silent, and no one knew if his silence was intentional or if his tongue was simply incapacitated, unable to grasp the language of speech.

His only language was looking at people... and smiling. He smiled at everything: at humans, animals, and inanimate objects. His smile never changed or altered; it was always the same smile bearing the naive, simple goodness of children.

Sometimes he would reach out his hand and affectionately pat the heads of passersby, like someone bestowing a blessing upon the people. The people accepted these touches with a kind of tolerance that, over the days, turned into a sense of optimism and a quest for blessings. The neighborhood children, who initially feared him, soon grew accustomed to him and felt at ease around him. Some would even approach him on purpose to receive these blessed touches.

"Shabtai" always wore a loose, striped poplin *galabiya*, and placed a white skullcap on his head that he never took off, summer or winter. On his feet, he wore leather slippers. He would sit for long hours of the day on a wooden chair at the threshold of his old house at the entrance of "Khamis Al-Ads" alley... silently watching the comings and goings, with that same naive smile on his lips, which quickly transferred to you if you looked at him long enough.

"Shabtai" only left his chair for urgent bodily needs, or when his sister "Zahra" called him to eat. Then he would carry his chair and disappear inside the house for an hour or so, returning with his chair to take his seat again in front of the entrance.

"Shabtai" lived in this house with his sister "Zahra," a spinster three years his senior. Zahra was not beautiful enough to attract suitors, so the marriage train passed her by, leaving her responsible for caring for her brother and managing the household.

"Shabtai" and his sister "Zahra" lived on the bare minimum. They had no source of income other than the revenue from this house, which consisted of three other apartments, inherited from their grandfather "Raphael."

One afternoon during the Passover holiday, "Shabtai" sat in his usual spot at the threshold... smiling at people's faces and patting children's heads as was his custom. Suddenly, a young officer, accompanied by his wife, passed in front of the house on their way to the "Kharonfash" neighborhood to visit his friend's family. The officer stopped in front of "Shabtai" to ask him about the road leading to Kharonfash.

"Shabtai" got up from his seat... approached the officer's wife, and gently stroked her head, then returned to his seat, his naive smile filling his face.

The officer flared up in anger. He considered this foolish behavior from this strange man an insult to his dignity. His hand rose swiftly... and a slap fell upon Shabtai's face, strong... violent... earth-shattering.

Four fingers carved red lines across the smooth cheek. But "Shabtai" didn't move or moan. The familiar smile never left his lips... and his playful gaze continued to peer into the eyes of the officer. In fact, it seemed to the officer that this insolent man's gaze had grown bolder, and his smile more mocking. The officer’s rage boiled over, and he raised his hand to deliver more slaps. But before his hand could fall on Shabtai's face again, he heard a voice shouting at him:

"Fear God, Bey... He is a simpleton... He doesn't know what he's doing, and he doesn't deserve this cruelty from you."

The officer's hand froze in mid-air. He stepped back, examining Shabtai's face... and met that strange smile glued to him, making a person feel they were facing a being not of this world.

The officer's hand dropped. He muttered a few words as if apologizing, then left the place with his wife, while "Shabtai" followed them with his broad smile... carrying the innocence and playfulness of children. But on his face remained the marks of a slap that clouded his clear skin.

The officer and his wife returned home after their visit to their friends. That same evening, the officer sat at the dinner table. When he reached out his hand to take something from the table, he felt that his arm refused to obey him or respond to his will.

The officer thought his arm had gone numb, so he began massaging it with his left hand, hoping it would return to its normal state. But in vain; his right arm remained completely paralyzed... And the officer went to his bed that night, plagued by dark thoughts that chased the sleep from his eyes.

As soon as the sun rose the next day... he rushed to consult a doctor. The doctor assured him his arm was healthy, and that the X-rays showed no organic disease or injury. Yet... the officer still could not move his arm, and his sense of paralysis was stronger than any doctor's reassurance.

Two weeks passed, and the situation did not change. The arm remained motionless, and the feeling of helplessness grew with the passing days... until it became despair.

The doctors were baffled. Some of his friends advised him to see a psychiatrist and neurologist. He didn't hesitate... but medicine stood helpless... just like his arm!

His mother, a pious woman who believed in charms and miracles, confronted him one day: "You have offended one of the 'Men of God' (saints). He must be praying against you. Go to him and ask for his forgiveness..."

The officer almost exploded in his mother's face, accusing her of naivety and ignorance, if not for the image of the man with the childish, permanent smile flashing in his memory. He remembered "Shabtai" in the Jewish Quarter. He remembered the slap... and imagined he could hear its echo ringing in his ears. He saw "Shabtai's" face with its naive, kind smile... and his soft skin where the fingers had carved four red lines.

The officer hurried out of the house, took a taxi, and sped to Khamis Al-Ads alley. There he found "Shabtai" sitting as usual at the threshold of the house, looking at people and smiling... smiling at everything: humans, animals, and inanimate objects.

The officer felt that this smile made him feel he was standing before an unnatural being. He approached "Shabtai" and spoke to him in a voice overflowing with remorse:

"Forgive me, Sheikh Shabtai... I didn't know you were one of the righteous Men of God... I thought ill of you, and I wronged you... May God forgive you (and me)..."

Silence reigned for a moment. "Shabtai" extended his hand, gently stroking the officer's head, the smile filling his face. In his eyes was a strange gleam!

Tears welled up in the officer's eyes, and he grabbed "Shabtai's" hand, kissing it as he said:

"You have forgiven me, Sheikh Shabtai... May God prolong your life."

Suddenly, the officer realized he was holding "Sheikh Shabtai's" hand with his right hand... the paralyzed hand. The miracle had happened!!

And since that day, the people in the neighborhood gave "Shabtai" the title of "Sheikh"... and called him "Sheikh Shabtai."

Chapter 2: The Destiny (Victor and Farida)

"I swear to you, Mama."

The mother murmured in relief, as if a heavy burden had been lifted from her chest:

"You have relieved me, Victor... May God comfort your heart, my son."

Rivka fell silent... her breathing calmed... then she closed her eyes... and departed from this life.

This happened five years ago, and "Victor" still stood by his "oath" to his late mother. He had not married, because his sister "Farida" had not yet married... or, to be exact, she hadn't found the "man" who would accept marrying her. Although destiny chose to deprive her of the grace of beauty, it did not skimp on granting her natural intelligence, a good soul, and a big heart full of love for all people.

"Farida" knew she did not possess the beauty of her peers, and that she lacked the feminine allure that draws the eye. Therefore, she was always introverted, never leaving the house except for an absolute necessity or an urgent errand.

"Victor" tried by all ways and means to find a "groom" for his sister "Farida." He opened his house to his young friends, male and female, and placed his new gramophone and record collection at their disposal. He made sure to create occasions as an excuse to invite them. At first, his colleagues accepted his invitations; he spent generously on them and provided entertainment. But when they discovered his true motive, their enthusiasm waned, and they turned away... all except "Sonia," that glamorous blonde whose heart "Victor" managed to capture ever since he first danced with her. She made sure to attend his gatherings.

"Sonia" possessed everything that "Farida" lacked in terms of feminine charm and temptation. Her face was perfectly proportioned... the most beautiful part being a small, proud nose, emerald-colored eyes, and a smile revealing pearls in a sea of rubies. As for her figure, any painter would have wished to use her as a "model" for his finest masterpieces.

It was only natural that "Victor" would fall head over heels in love with "Sonia" and wish for the day he could fulfill his hope of marrying her. But his "oath" to his mother stood as a barrier. When he announced his "engagement" to her, he hoped that "Farida" would inevitably get married sooner or later. But days and months passed, and no one came forward to ask for Farida's hand. Worry began to gnaw at him... and many questions buzzed in his head: What would be his fate if "Farida" remained an old maid and never married? And how long could "Sonia" wait for him?

He couldn't imagine his life without her... Just thinking about it plunged him into a sea of gloom and sorrow.

"Farida" felt the pain "Victor" was suffering. She would always tell him:

"If this whole story depends on me... I release you from your oath. You get married... and the Lord will provide for me."

But "Victor" didn't dare break his oath. The image of his dying mother and her pleading looks refused to leave his imagination.

Three years passed, and "Victor" had not set a date for the wedding. Sonia's family began to grumble, despite the money and gifts he showered on them to ensure their silence.

One day, "Victor" went to visit "Sonia" as usual, but did not find her at home. Her mother said, avoiding looking into his eyes:

"Frankly, Victor, the girl doesn't want to see you anymore."

"But I love her."

"And she loves you too, but that doesn't mean you should keep her tied up in this miserable engagement."

"You know my circumstances, Umm Sonia."

Umm Sonia interrupted him with anger and firmness:

"By God, we've been patient enough... either you marry the girl, or you leave her."

"Victor" left Sonia's house empty-handed, overwhelmed by deadly despair. He stumbled his way home, drowning in his dark thoughts. Suddenly he stopped, as if remembering something, and turned into a narrow alley leading to the house of "Umm Sophie," the matchmaker.

He decided to resort to "Umm Sophie" after all other paths were blocked. Going to a "matchmaker" was the last thing he ever wanted to do, were it not for the harsh circumstances he was enduring, which could turn into a tragedy if he didn't find a quick solution.

"Umm Sophie" sighed as she felt the ten-pound note "Victor" placed in her hand, saying:

"May God give me the strength to do what is good, my son."

"And you have another ten pounds from me, Umm Sophie, if you find her a groom."

"Umm Sophie" returned a week later to tell "Victor" in a tone tinged with despair:

"I'll be honest with you... my feet are worn out... Everyone I go to tells me, 'Anyone but Farida'."

"So what do we do, Umm Sophie?"

"I have one guy who might accept her... but I don't think you'll like him."

"Anyone is fine with me... The important thing is that she gets married."

"Even if it's the boy 'Elie'?"

"'Elie' who?"

"'Elie the bicycle repairman'."

"Victor" responded in disgust, as if he couldn't believe his ears:

"You mean the thief? The one who stole from the British army camp and went to prison??"

"Brother, that's an old story... He has repented and God has guided him."

"But he's a hashish smoker... a delinquent, and his morals are garbage..."

"Umm Sophie" adjusted her shawl around her head and moved to stand up, saying:

"So, you're the one who doesn't want to make things easy."

"Not at all, Umm Sophie... but she's my sister, and I can't just throw her away like that..."

"Umm Sophie" said, winking her eyes—which were framed by thick black kohl that made her look like a circus performer:

"Is 'Lady Farida' a beauty queen? You know the whole truth of the matter."

Victor protested:

"Beauty isn't everything, Umm Sophie."

"And if beauty isn't everything... what made you run after 'Sonia', oh soul of Umm Sophie??"

"Victor" wanted to say something, but "Umm Sophie" continued, playing with her eyebrows and moving her bent finger left and right like a wall clock pendulum:

"Brother, let her marry him... and then God will solve it."

"Okay, and if she's not happy with him?"

"She can ask for a divorce..."

"You mean she should get married just to get divorced?"

"So what? She wouldn't be the first to divorce, nor the last... The important thing is that you solve your problem and marry 'Sonia' before she slips out of your hands."

Umm Sophie's words brought him back to his chronic problem. He found himself torn between his care for Farida's best interests and his love for Sonia... but his hesitation didn't last long. Sonia's scale tipped the balance.

Even though "Farida" was ready to accept anyone who offered her marriage, the surprise almost paralyzed her thinking when "Victor" presented her with the name of the "respectable" groom... "Elie the bicycle repairman." He was a young man with a bad reputation, a fierce temper who resorted to violence when angry, and he had a criminal record that brought no honor.

"Farida" knew that if she refused to marry him, it meant destroying her brother's happiness with her own hands and shattering his hope of marrying the one he loved. She gathered all the willpower, good nature, and nobility of heart that God had given her... just so she could say: "Yes."

"Farida" got married... and "Victor" got married... on the exact same night. The people in the neighborhood expected Farida's marriage to fail quickly and that she would return to her brother's house in a matter of days.

But what happened was strange... Days and weeks passed... and "Farida" did not leave her marital home. "Elie" began to change; he stopped using "drugs," his fierce temper calmed down. He no longer resorted to violence, but began to care about his work and his shop. For the first time, people saw "Elie the bicycle repairman" walking in the neighborhood with a kind smile on his face.

"Farida" managed, with her innate intelligence and big heart, to mold her husband into a new human being, worthy of her love and respect.

Not even a year passed... before the people in the neighborhood were surprised to learn that "Victor" had gone to the personal status court, demanding a divorce from his wife, "Sonia."

And when I left the Jewish Quarter, "Farida" was living in a happy home... supported by a loving husband and young children.

As for "Victor"... he was still searching... for a wife.

Chapter 3: The Thug (Al-Futuwwa)

"Saadia" lived in the "Sakalba" alley, but his authority extended to all the alleys and lanes of the neighborhood, from the edges of the Goldsmiths' Street (Al-Sagha) to the outskirts of the "Fish Market" alley.

"Saadia" was in the prime of his youth... huge in stature, heavily muscled, with narrow eyes and a flat nose like a boxer's. Besides that, he was quick-tempered, volatile, disliked discussion, and hated using his brain.

Because of this, he was accustomed to settling any argument or debate with his fist, or with a headbutt.

Thus, the children nicknamed him "Tarzan." The adults, however, called him "The Thug" (Al-Futuwwa).

"The Thug" lived in an old house with his elderly mother and his sister "Rivka," who was five years older than him. Rivka worked sewing clothes for children and women in the neighborhood to support herself and her mother after her father died, leaving them nothing but this delinquent boy who succeeded neither in school nor in work.

How his father had tried to teach him a manual trade to spare him from poverty! But all his attempts failed. Saadia preferred to loiter in the streets until late at night, indifferent to the heartbreak and pain he caused his parents. Neither words nor the stick could straighten "Saadia" out. By the time his father died, "Saadia" was a solidly built young man, tall, with a rough voice, stepping into his seventeenth year.

After the death of their provider, the family went through a difficult period, which made "Rivka" cut off her brother's daily allowance. "Saadia" rebelled, protesting this injustice, but the determination of his mother and sister was stronger than his rebellion.

His sister scolded him: "Look at you, you've become a hulking beast... instead of living off us as a burden... go find a job to earn your daily bread."

The mother joined her daughter, shouting in her son's face: "Have you forgotten, boy, that your sister is about to get married, and we must save some pennies for her trousseau and dowry?"

Faced with this irrefutable argument, "Saadia" had no choice but to bow to reality. He went looking for work to compensate for his lost allowance. He worked as an errand boy for "Halfon" the grocer, organizing his storeroom, delivering purchases to customers' homes, and keeping his eyes wide open so the hands of local boys wouldn't secretly snatch from the sacks of walnuts and almonds stacked at the shop's entrance.

"Saadia" continued working for "Halfon" the grocer for about a year and a half... until "Halfon" caught him one day smoking a cigarette in the storeroom that reeked of "hashish." He fired him from the shop.

It just so happened that very night, a fire broke out in "Halfon's" shop. Were it not for the vigilance of his neighbors, who rushed to extinguish the flames, the fire would have consumed the shop and everything in it.

The very next morning... "Saadia" was surprised by Mr. "Halfon" coming to his house and begging him to return to work. "Saadia" was astounded, staring into "Halfon's" face without understanding a thing. He heard "Halfon's" voice saying:

"I know you're upset with me because I fired you... but please, sir, you have my apologies, don't be angry... Here, I'm kissing your head."

"Halfon" kissed "Saadia's" head... but "Saadia" remained frozen in place, his narrow eyes scanning Mr. "Halfon's" face, trying to understand the secret behind his strange behavior. Before he could utter a word, "Halfon" pulled a five-pound note from his pocket and shoved it into "Saadia's" hand, saying in an imploring tone:

"Take this as a small compensation for the offense... and the forgiver is generous. But by your father's life, let's drop this business of fires... I'm not insured on the shop, and if it burns down, my house is ruined."

"Halfon" left... leaving "Saadia" in his place. When he recovered from his shock and saw the five pounds in his hand, he discovered there was an easy way to make money.

From that day on, the shop owners in the neighborhood feared him and paid him great respect. "Saadia" managed to exploit their fear of his brutality and tyranny to take from them whatever he wanted.

A pack of "Coutarelli" cigarettes was presented to him every morning by "Uncle Habib" the grocer. Milk and cheese were a humble gift from the "Wahba" brothers' shop. As for sugar, tea, and coffee, they came from "Halfon's" shop. If he craved any fruit or vegetables... all he had to do was reach his hand into any cart or stall in the market and scoop up whatever his appetite desired.

Even Uncle "Mustafa," the pickle (torshi) vendor, who stood with his barrel-loaded cart at the corner of the Karaites' alley and the poultry market, did not escape paying the "tax." As soon as he saw "Saadia" approaching, he would leave all his customers to prepare a special plate of various pickles he made himself, which rightfully earned him the title "King of Pickles."

Thus, "Saadia" continued to impose his authority over the people of the neighborhood. If he asked for something, he found someone to fulfill his request instantly. If he announced a desire, those around him rushed to execute it without debate, because "Saadia," as we mentioned, was a quick-tempered man... who didn't like a lot of talk. If his nerves flared, he turned into a raging bull... hitting... headbutting... and smashing everything around him.

Some young men in the neighborhood whose dignity had been trampled tried to teach this "bull" a lesson in manners. They set an ambush for him at night, near the entrance of his house. As soon as he passed by, they pounced on him, threw a burlap sack over his head, and began raining blows upon him fiercely and viciously, until the sticks broke in their hands.

When their strength waned and they were gasping for breath from exhaustion, "Saadia" pulled the sack off his head, threw it at his feet calmly—like someone taking off a dirty shirt—and then went to work on them with his fists and his head. Had they not been fast runners, he would have torn them apart with his crushing blows.

"Saadia" didn't derive his authority solely from his own muscles, but also from his cooperation with the "thugs" of neighboring districts. It was the custom of the "thugs" of the popular

neighborhoods to cooperate with each other to fend off any danger that might threaten their status. Each of them would rush to the aid of his colleague if the need arose.

"Saadia" was keen on strengthening these ties. From time to time, he would visit the "thugs" of "Al-Sagha," "Al-Azhar," "Kharonfash," and "Beit Al-Qadi," bringing them gifts or greeting them for the holidays. Most of them would return the visit during the Jewish holidays... which were plenty throughout the year.

One day, ululations of joy (zaghareed) rang out from "Saadia's" house. People learned that the "Thug" had engaged himself to a girl from the neighborhood who owned a house in the "Ibn Maimon Synagogue" alley and a toy shop on Muski Street.

The people of the neighborhood were amazed. They whispered in low voices so as not to reach "Saadia's" ears: How could a girl like her accept a young man like "Saadia," who knows nothing of life's affairs except threatening people and beating God's creatures?

Some said the girl saw him one day charging and battling in a heated fight where he defeated three strong young men; she admired him, and he became the knight of her dreams. Others said it was an old love dating back to childhood days, and that the girl convinced her family that "Saadia" would never straighten out in his life unless he fulfilled his wish of marrying her.

People hoped that the "engagement" would refine the morals of the raging "bull," even just a little. But their hopes were quickly dashed. "Saadia" remained exactly as he was... or perhaps he even grew more sullen, fierce, and violent.

The wedding day arrived. The "Moses bin Maimon" alley put on a festive garment; the facade of the newlyweds' house was decorated with colored lights, green flags hung above the windows and balconies, and the ground was sprinkled with yellow sand in honor of the couple. Joyous ululations echoed everywhere.

It was a "wedding" the likes of which the Jewish Quarter had not witnessed in many years. The "thugs" of the neighboring popular districts danced to the tunes of the traditional flute (mizmar) and drumbeats, and one of the famous popular singers sang until midnight.

When the noise died down... and the guests dispersed...

The groom and his bride entered their room.

The people breathed a sigh of relief. The night had passed safely, without any battles or clashes breaking out among the guests over the "Noqta" (tips for performers), as is customary at the weddings of "thugs" and neighborhood bosses.

Some young men looked up at the lit window of the newlyweds as they headed home... and one of them laughed, saying:

"Poor bride, guys... May God help her tonight."

The young men laughed... and dispersed.

The lights went out, and silence prevailed. The only sound interrupting it was the footsteps of the patrol policeman walking back and forth in the alley.

The hours passed slowly, and the first signs of dawn began to appear in the sky. Suddenly, the silence was pierced by a woman's scream coming from the newlyweds' window. The apartment door flew open and "Saadia" rushed out, fleeing half-naked... followed by his clothes, which his "bride" was throwing at him while screaming like a wounded lioness:

"Don't you ever show me your face again, you son of a dog! You fraud! You emasculated loser! You failure! You..."

One of the neighbors opened her window and looked out to see the cause of this commotion. She was horrified by the sight of the newlyweds in this strange situation. She asked the bride in utter astonishment:

"What happened, bride? God forbid!"

The bride replied, beating her chest with her hands, her voice almost choking from extreme rage:

"A disaster happened, Mrs. Esther... His highness, who makes himself out to be a thug, a tough guy, and a Tarzan, turned out to be a defective failure... meaning, in plain Arabic... he's not a man..."

The neighbor closed her window and sped like a bullet to relay the news from house to house. Meanwhile, "Saadia" gathered his scattered clothes and left the "Ibn Maimon" alley with his head bowed, cold sweat pouring down his face.

By morning, the whole neighborhood knew the story of "Saadia's" failure with his bride. And from that day on, no one in the neighborhood dreaded "Saadia" anymore... or feared him.

The "Thug" lost his title...

And his authority.

Chapter 4: Uncle Mahmoud

The day I met him, he was a man in the prime of his life, strongly built with dark skin. He always wore a blue *galabiya*, tied his waist with a thick leather belt, and placed a gray knitted wool cap on his head, wrapped in a white *balassa* (scarf). The most prominent thing about him was his large feet, as he always walked barefoot. His chest was covered with thick black hair that protruded from the opening of his blue *galabiya*.

His name was "Mahmoud Al-Toulouni." He lived alone in the Jewish Quarter; he had no wife, no children, and no relatives. In the winter, his refuge was the bakery of the boss "Shabtai Barbar"... He would lay his bedding on its floor at night, warming himself with the hot ash. In the summer, he would seek shelter at "Salama's" cafe after its patrons left, spending the remaining hours of the night curled up behind the counter, leaning his head against the wall... deep in slumber.

No one knew exactly where this man came from, or why he settled in the Jewish Quarter rather than any other neighborhood.

Some said he migrated in his youth from the countryside to Cairo seeking a livelihood after making a living became too hard in his hometown. Others confirmed he came from a prominent family living in the "Touloun" district, but a dispute broke out between him and his brothers over distributing their father's inheritance, so he left the house and wandered from one neighborhood to another until he finally found himself... in the Jewish Quarter.

The people in the Jewish Quarter opened their hearts and homes to this strange newcomer. He felt comfortable with them and loved them... and he settled among them.

Truth be told... "Mahmoud Al-Toulouni" lived in the Jewish Quarter as one of its own sons, even though he was a devout Muslim who adhered to the tenets of his religion. He performed the five daily prayers, fasted the month of Ramadan, and raised his finger to recite the Shahada (declaration of faith) whenever a funeral passed by him in the street.

At first, the man was wary of Jewish food. But when he lived among them and learned that they forbid pork, do not eat carrion, and salt the meat of cows and sheep before cooking to remove any clinging blood... his mind was put at ease. He began eating their food with a satisfied soul and an open appetite.

All the residents of the neighborhood, young and old, knew "Mahmoud Al-Toulouni" and called him "Uncle Mahmoud" (Amm Mahmoud). There wasn't a house in the neighborhood that the man didn't enter to carry in a new piece of furniture... or carry out an old one. He was a skilled porter. He lifted the heaviest loads on his back with ease and flexibility, using his leather belt to secure the load and his large feet to maintain his balance.

The man shared in the joys and sorrows of the neighborhood's people. If a wedding was held in the neighborhood, "Uncle Mahmoud" was the one who carried the chairs to the venue, set up the tables, and helped the hosts prepare the dinner feast.

At funerals... the man was the first to fulfill the needs of the deceased's family and serve plain (bitter) coffee to the mourners.

If a family celebrated the circumcision ("Tahour") of a newborn, "Uncle Mahmoud" was the one who carried the "Chair of Elijah the Prophet" upon which the newborn was circumcised, walking with it proudly from the synagogue to the celebrants' house, like a camel carrying a palanquin (the Mahmal). If someone asked him:

"Whose son are they circumcising, Uncle Mahmoud?"

He would answer immediately: "The son of Mr. Ben Ezra."

"Is it Youssef's son?"

"The son of his brother 'Elie' and his mother, Mrs. Sarah, the daughter of 'Shaul', the fabric merchant at the beginning of Muski Street..."

Such was "Uncle Mahmoud," close and friendly... a true "neighborhood elder." He knew all the families in the area, big and small, rich and poor, their origins and backgrounds. It's no wonder; the man had spent nearly twenty years among its residents, seeking his livelihood, his feet leading him to every house where he found work, and every shop whose owner needed him.

The man never exaggerated in asking for wages; he was content and satisfied with little. A few piastres, a modest meal, or a piece of old clothing he could use. Even though "Uncle Mahmoud" earned some money from his work, I never saw him wear a *galabiya* other than his old blue one, and I never once saw shoes on his feet.

Some people said he was saving his money for his old age, when the years would render him unable to work. Others insisted the man was saving his earnings to buy a piece of land in his hometown.

Some liked to joke with him, asking:

"How much have you saved up, Uncle Mahmoud?"

The man would raise his head, point his hand to the sky, and say with the cheerful face of a patient believer:

"Provision is from God... I ask for nothing but good health."

The strange thing is that "Uncle Mahmoud" never left the neighborhood for a single day. When he finished a job, he would spread out on the threshold of one of the houses, catching his breath until another job called him.

Thus the man spun like a windmill throughout the days of the week, never ceasing his hustle except for one hour at noon every Friday, when he headed to the "Al-Bakri" mosque near the neighborhood, or the Shaarani mosque, to perform the Friday prayer. When Saturday arrived—the Jewish day of rest, when they closed their shops and ceased working—the man retreated to an abandoned shop in "Synagogue Alley" (Darb Al-Kenees) which he used as a dwelling and prayer space. He threw his tired body onto a straw mat covering the floor and surrendered his eyelids to a long slumber, making up for the sleep he missed during the workdays.

Until one day, "Uncle Mahmoud" stopped appearing in the neighborhood. People thought a sudden illness had struck the man, keeping him out of sight, and that he would soon reappear. But when his absence prolonged and there was no sign of him in the neighborhood, people began to worry.

"Uncle Mahmoud" had become a familiar figure among the neighborhood's residents... indeed, an integral part of its human and social reality, just like Sheikh "Shabtai," "Abu Lihaf," "Salama the Cafe Owner," "Asher the Undertaker," blind "Uncle Eliyahu," and others.

Speculations and assumptions began, trying to solve the mystery.

Some said: "Perhaps the man returned to his hometown, after the pangs of longing for his family and people overflowed."

Others said: "Or maybe he got married."

The pessimists, however, expressed their fear that the man had suffered an accident... or died.

Days passed... and three months went by. Life returned to its normal course, and the people in the neighborhood began to accustom themselves to the man's absence, just as one accustoms oneself to the loss of loved ones taken by death.

Until one cold winter day, while some people were outside their houses catching a bit of warm sunshine and chatting... suddenly, a taxi stopped at the corner of "Oven Alley" (Darb Al-Furn), and two men stepped out.

One of them was "Uncle Mahmoud."

I almost didn't recognize the man. He was clean-shaven... wearing a fine wool *galabiya*, and on his head a felt cap wrapped in a white silk shawl... On his feet were new shoes. The other man was a handsome young man, wearing an elegant suit and medical glasses that gave him an endearing sense of dignity and poise.

People quickly gathered around the two men. Hands reached out to shake "Uncle Mahmoud's" hand and embrace him.

Voices rose asking him:

"Where have you been, Uncle Mahmoud?"

"Where have you been, man?"

"Where were you all this long time?"

"Uncle Mahmoud" extricated himself with difficulty from the embraces of his welcomers and pointed to the handsome young man:

"Allow me first to introduce my son... Dr. Khalil."

The young man quickly added:

"Khalil Mahmoud Al-Toulouni."

Someone asked in amazement:

"Is this really your son, Uncle Mahmoud?..."

"Yes... his mother passed away when he was ten... I raised him and educated him until he finished his medical studies in England... He returned from there three months ago."

Then he turned to his son and said:

"I brought you here specifically so you could see with your own eyes the good people I lived with during one of the happiest periods of my life."

Dr. Khalil cast his eyes over the cheerful, welcoming faces of the neighborhood folk, and said with a touch of emotion in his voice:

"I couldn't have imagined they loved you this much."

Salama the cafe owner shouted, pointing to his cafe:

"Your father used to sleep at night behind this counter!"

"And he toiled and worked hard all day long!"

"And he slept in Shabtai Barbar's bakery in the winter!"

"And he lived with us through our joys and sorrows!"

The doctor looked at his father, tears welling up in his eyes, and said in a choked voice:

"You suffered a lot, Father."

Mahmoud said, his kind smile on his face:

"Everything is worth it, Doctor."

The two men embraced... and Dr. Khalil laid his head on his father's chest, breaking into audible sobs.

"Uncle Mahmoud" patted his son's back with sympathy and tenderness, saying:

"It's not proper, Doctor. What will the people say?"

No one said anything... Each of them was drying their tears with a handkerchief... or wiping them with their palm... for the tears had choked their throats.

After a few days had passed... people saw "Uncle Mahmoud" hanging a large sign on the balcony of an empty apartment in the building facing "Shabtai Barbar's" bakery.

The sign bore this phrase:

Clinic

Dr. Khalil Mahmoud

Internal Medicine – Universities of London

Chapter 5: Don Juan

"Rahmo" or "Rahim" was a very old man. His age, according to people's estimations, was between seventy and eighty years. He himself did not know exactly when he was born, but he insisted that he lived through the Orabi Revolt, which began as an uprising of the Egyptian army against Khedive Tawfiq and ended with the British occupation of Egypt.

"Rahmo" was born, therefore, on some day in one of the years of the second half of the nineteenth century, in the city of Mansoura... His father had emigrated from the Levant in his youth and married the daughter of "Rabbi Shlomo," who lived in Mansoura. He had two sons with her, "Yaqub" and "Rahmo." Then death overtook the father following an epidemic that swept the city and perished many. When the wife found herself alone, she took her two sons and moved with them to Cairo, settling in the Jewish Quarter.

"Rahmo" enrolled in the "Frères" school adjacent to the Holy Kiswa Authority, at the corner of Sidi Shaarani Street. After a few years, he managed to obtain a certificate that qualified him to work as a clerk in a bank.

As for "Yaqub," he left school and worked as a laborer in a fabric shop on Muski Street. His ambition then drove him to chase dreams of wealth, so he emigrated to the United States, and news of him ceased.

"Rahmo" looked younger than his actual age. He took great care of himself and his appearance. He was always clean-shaven, and a dyed black lock of hair covered part of his bald spot. His perfectly styled, curled mustache, like that of King Fuad, was an object of admiration and envy for many of his peers.

Even though he was a retired clerk with nothing but his meager pension, he was meticulous about his elegance. His suit was always clean, the collar of his white shirt was starched, and his necktie sat perfectly in place, never shifting left or right. His bright red tarbush (fez) sat tilted on his head, almost touching the edge of his right eyebrow.

"Rahmo" was almost an exact replica of the comedic actor "Sharfantah," whom we used to see in Al-Rihani's plays. He was always cheerful, quick-witted, and laughed a lot... bearing none of the world's worries.

And no wonder. "Rahmo" was a bachelor... unbound by family obligations, and his freedom was not restricted by the chains of marriage.

He refused to marry, not because he hated women, but because, as he said, he refused to walk into a "prison" on his own two feet. When his mother was alive, and he was still a young man, she urged him to marry... She would always tell him:

"I want to see your children, Rahmo, before I die."

"Rahmo" would assure her that the time had not yet come, and that when he found the right girl, he would not hesitate to marry her to "complete half his religion," as they say. However, "Rahmo" knew he could never give up his freedom, no matter the temptations and benefits of marriage.

Besides, what did he lack that would make him think of marriage? His mother, despite her old age, was a first-class "housewife." His clothes were always clean, his socks darned, and his shirts were always in place, not missing a single button. His shoes were always shined... his bed clean... and it never happened that he returned home and didn't find a delicious meal waiting for him.

As for his need for women, it did not exceed brief visits that "Rahmo" made from time to time... to certain brothels in the "Azbakeya" district. Yet, he loved to appear before the residents of the neighborhood as the "Don Juan" whom women raced to please. He would recount to his young peers tales of his "romantic adventures" utilizing his vivid imagination and his uniquely stimulating style, which relied heavily on theatrical exaggeration.

The strange thing is that he managed to convince people that he was a true "Don Juan." So much so that some women in the neighborhood would blush with embarrassment if he passed them in the street.

And so "Rahmo" kept dodging marriage until the train passed him by... and his mother died before her eyes could be graced by the sight of his offspring.

"Rahmo" became a middle-aged man... then an old man... but he remained lively, elegant, and articulate.

The story of "Rahmo" could have ended right there... if fate hadn't willed otherwise.

On a summer afternoon in 1950, a prominent lawyer knocked on his door. Once they were seated in the living room, the lawyer asked him:

"Are you Mr. Rahamim Sassoon Levi?"

"That is me."

"Do you have brothers?"

"I have one brother named Yaqub, but I lost touch with him since he emigrated to the United States about fifty years ago."

Then "Rahmo" continued in a tone tinged with anxiety and apprehension:

"But why all these questions?"

The lawyer looked down for a moment, then said in a voice he tried to make gentle:

"I regret to inform you, Mr. Rahmo, of the death of your brother."

"My brother died?..."

"And he left you a fortune estimated at eighty thousand Egyptian pounds."

"Rahmo" almost fainted, if the lawyer hadn't aided him with a sip of water... which brought him back to his senses.

Overnight, "Rahmo" became a wealthy man. He refused to move to the "Zamalek" or "Garden City" or "Heliopolis" neighborhoods, as anyone from the neighborhood who acquired wealth usually did. "Rahmo" was naturally a sentimental man; he was tied to the Jewish Quarter by a long life and precious memories... and old men his age, in whose company he found comfort, and who found comfort in his. Add to that the fact that the people here believed his tales of "adventures," to the point where he held the title "Don Juan of the Neighborhood." This title brought him a rush of pride and arrogance that surpassed the thrill of wealth.

The man increased his elegance, began wearing the finest clothes, and renewed the furniture in his house to the latest fashion... Then he started thinking about... marriage.

Marriage was no longer a responsibility he couldn't bear, now that he had money. He could buy anything with money... even youth!! As for old age, he would erase its wrinkles with a coating of gold!

It was not difficult for "Rahmo" to find a girl from the neighborhood willing to accept him as a husband, especially if she dreamt of instant wealth... and saw the pinnacle of happiness in a pearl necklace... a diamond ring... or a "Rolls Royce" car five meters long.

"Rosa" was exactly this type. Her mother was also of the same breed, seeing money as everything in life. Perhaps the poverty in which "Umm Rosa" and her daughter lived, and the hardship they suffered after their provider died, was what made her see money as the ultimate goal and aspiration.

"Rosa" and her mother lived in a dark "basement" (badrom), in an old house facing "Rahmo's" house. The girl was highly attractive and beautiful, keen on her elegance despite her poverty. "Rahmo" used to see her from his balcony every morning as she went to her job at the "Cicurel" department stores on Fuad Street. Sometimes he would bid her good morning, and she wouldn't even bother to reply; she would just continue on her way with a frowning face, indifferent to his pursuing gazes.

But when the man became wealthy, the situation changed. The frown turned into a delicate smile... and returning the greeting was accompanied by an even better one.

"Rosa" started lingering longer every morning at the door of the house, fixing her clothes, putting the final touches on her "makeup," giving "Rahmo" a chance to exchange words with her. The conversation sometimes turned into whispers and signals exuding an overwhelming scent of femininity... a scent that returned the old man to his youth. He quickly proposed marriage to her.

The trap closed around the man... and "Rahmo" fell into the snare set for him by "Rachel" and her daughter "Rosa."

On the day of the "engagement"... "Rahmo" presented the girl with a "Shabka" (engagement gift)—an emerald and diamond ring worth two thousand pounds, befitting his status. As for her mother, her share was a precious fur coat, the likes of which only a lady from the aristocratic class would wear.

The marriage took place... The newlyweds spent their honeymoon in Alexandria. When they returned to the neighborhood, a luxurious apartment awaited them, rented by "Rahmo" in a newly built building. The mother had personally overseen the selection of its furniture.

When the mother was alone with her daughter, asking her how she spent the "honeymoon," "Rosa's" eyes brimmed with tears...

She said in sorrow:

"There was absolutely no 'honey' at all."

The mother beat her chest with her hand and said:

"Do you mean he....."

"Rosa" interrupted, wiping her tears:

"And what did you expect from a man of that age?"

The mother had no answer, for she was the one who pushed her daughter into this fate, and she was the one who embellished the idea of marrying "Rahmo" out of greed for his money. The mother patted her daughter's shoulder and said:

"You must be patient, my daughter... this old man won't live long..."

Then she continued maliciously: "All you have to do now is exploit his weak point."

"Rosa" began to exploit the situation to her advantage. She demanded that her mother move in to live with them in the same apartment so she could be close to her. "Rahmo" tried to object at first, but he soon bowed to his wife's wishes in the end.

The wife's demands multiplied... her greed intensified. "Rahmo" paid without complaining or objecting, as if he wanted to compensate her for a "right" he lacked the ability to give.

"Rahmo" discovered his impotence on the very first night of his marriage. This impotence seized him by the collar whenever he went to his wife's bed. It cut deep into his soul that he, the "Don Juan of the Neighborhood," failed to prove his manhood to his wife.

"Rahmo" did not leave a single doctor or specialist without seeking their help, but in vain... Medicine stood helpless to perform miracles. Some of his close friends advised him to use "narcotics." He tried all kinds... but they didn't stir a thing in him. He resorted to herbal remedies like cardamom, nutmeg, and frankincense... He went to the shrines of saints and righteous men, lighting candles for them and making vows... But nothing changed... "Rahmo" remained incapable of performing his duty as a man.

Weeks and months passed... and "Rahmo" was stricken with despair. He realized that the years were stronger than doctors, herbalists, and saints' shrines. He submitted humbly to the judgment of fate. But it was too hard for "Rahmo" to surrender the title of "Don Juan," and his masculine pride refused to let him become an object of jokes and mockery among the people in the neighborhood. He decided to keep the secret within the walls of his house, no matter the cost.

And it cost him dearly... His wife and her mother knew how desperate he was to hide his secret... so they exploited it to the absolute limits. The man paid submissively, not uttering a single word, not attempting to argue.

Whenever a friend stopped him and asked:

"When will the crown prince grace us, Mr. Rahmo?"

He would say bitterly:

"Kids? What kids... do I have the patience to raise kids now? Things are great just like this, thank God."

Then he would continue on his way with swift, rapid steps, almost jumping in his walk... as if he wanted to prove to people that he was still that "Don Juan" who possessed the strength and vitality of youth.

But deep inside, the man was in pain. In the depths of his soul, he felt the feeling of a defeated, helpless man submitting to the control of a cruel, powerful tyrant. Contrary to his usual nature, he became irritable... spoke little... and had no inclination to joke.

One day, a relative of "Umm Rosa" came to visit. He worked as a clerk in a lawyer's office. She asked him:

"Tell me, Zaki... if 'Rahmo' dies, will Rosa inherit all his wealth?"

The man said:

"She will inherit it, if he dies without leaving a will stating otherwise."

The mother's heart dropped in her chest, and she said without trying to hide her panic:

"You mean he can deprive her of the inheritance?"

"If he wishes to do so, especially since she hasn't borne him any children."

The visit ended... the man left... leaving "Rosa" and her mother prey to doubts and anxiety. There was no doubt "Rahmo" resented them, and it was not unlikely he had thought of depriving "Rosa" of his massive fortune.

"Rachel" gave free rein to her feverish imagination, searching for a solution to her daughter's problem...

Finally, the devil within guided her to what she was looking for.

The mother said to her daughter:

"It would truly be a disaster if the wealth slips from your hands, my daughter."

"Rosa" said with obvious anger:

"And what am I supposed to do, Mother?"

"You give him a child..."

"Rosa" said with a sarcasm tinged with the bitterness of pain:

"Do you want me to conceive by the Holy Spirit?..."

The mother said calmly:

"No... but from 'Albert'... the young man who loved you and hoped to marry you before you married 'Rahmo'."

Even though "Rosa" knew her mother wouldn't hesitate to commit the lowest and most despicable acts to reach the money, she stood almost stunned as she listened to the plan her mother's imagination hatched to secure the wealth.

When the mother finished detailing the plan, "Rosa" asked with some concern:

"And what if he denies the paternity of the child?"

The mother said, a malicious smile filling her face:

"'Rahmo' won't dare do that. He is, as you know, desperate to hide the secret of his impotence."

The following night... "Rosa" went to her ex-boyfriend "Albert's" apartment, and surrendered herself to him.

Six months passed. It was a summer night... "Rahmo" sat as usual on the balcony, looking for a breeze of air, drowning his sorrow in a bottle of "Cognac," when "Umm Rosa" entered, cheerfully exclaiming:

"Congratulations, Rahmo! A thousand congratulations!"

"Rahmo" looked at his "mother-in-law" with displeasure and asked in a voice overflowing with hatred:

"Congratulations for what?"

Umm "Rosa" said: "You will soon become a father..."

The piece of *Mezza* (appetizer) stuck in "Rahmo's" throat. He pushed it down with a gulp of his drink, and said, almost choking from coughing:

"I will become what?..."

"You will become a father, Rahmo."

"Is this a time for jokes, woman?"

"I am not joking, man... Your wife was just at the doctor's, and he confirmed she is pregnant."

Rahmo said in a raspy voice:

"Pregnant?..."

"And she is in her third month, Rahmo."

"Rahmo" stared into his mother-in-law's face for a moment like someone who doesn't believe his ears. Then he burst out laughing...

His mother-in-law joined him in laughter... But "Rahmo" kept laughing and laughing without interruption.

"Umm Rosa" tried to make him stop laughing, but in vain. "Rahmo's" roaring laughter echoed throughout the house and reached the neighbors' houses.

Suddenly... he stopped laughing, his hands went limp... his head fell onto his chest.

Umm Rosa screamed, calling him...

But the man had surrendered his soul to its Creator.

Thirty days passed, and "Rosa" entered the fourth month of her pregnancy.

When "Rahmo's" will was opened... it became clear that the man had bequeathed all his money to charitable institutions.

Chapter 6: Lanshano's Café

The news spread through the neighborhood like wildfire, igniting fierce debates in every alley, corner, and even in every house. Sometimes it would drop to a whisper passed from mouth to ear, and other times it would rise to something resembling political rallies during election campaigns.

The neighborhood was divided between those who believed the news and those who denied it. Those who believed it tried to find a logical explanation. When they failed, they began assuming various scenarios and possibilities... only to build more scenarios and possibilities upon them, like someone building sandcastles in the wind.

As for those who didn't believe the news, they went out to "Al-Muski" street and "Al-Sikka Al-Jadida" (The New Road) to snatch up the early editions of the evening newspapers the moment they reached the hands of the newspaper vendors.

In "Lanshano's Café," the patrons gathered around the journalist "Albert Mizrahi," who was confirming the truth of the news to those around him... stating he had gotten it from a reliable source at the Journalists' Syndicate two hours ago.

"Haroush" clapped his hands together and said in a voice squeezed with pain, as if mourning a dear deceased friend:

"It's unbelievable, people... She was here just two weeks ago. She visited the 'Ibn Maimon' (Maimonides) synagogue and asked Rabbi 'Binyamin' to read some prayers for the soul of her late father."

Youssef Oqnin commented on Haroush's words:

"She accustomed us to visiting the synagogue from time to time, and her hand was always generous in acts of charity."

One of the neighborhood elders remembered years gone by... a strong friendship had tied him to her father. He said:

"Her father, God rest his soul, had one of the most beautiful voices. When he chanted the *Birkat Kohanim* (Priestly Blessing), tears would flee from people's eyes... The Creator of creations..."

Mr. "Lanshano" sat up straight in his seat... cleared his throat... and before he could offer his opinion, someone entered the café carrying a copy of the "Al-Muqattam" newspaper that had just been published. Hands eagerly and curiously snatched it.

Eyes searched for the news... and there was no need to search for long. At the top of the front page... a picture of the artist "Leila Mourad." Her head was covered with a white veil, and she was kneeling on a prayer rug. Before her was a large, open Quran, and in front of her sat the Sheikh of Al-Azhar Mosque on a chair... giving her a lesson in the principles of Islamic law (Sharia).

The news, therefore, was true... Leila Mourad... had converted to Islam.

A heavy silence descended upon the café. The elders bowed their heads, their eyes glazed over... Dozens of bewildered questions stung their chests.

The heat of the air intensified the feeling of suffocation, and drops of sweat poured down their faces. The thread of silence was cut by "Albert Mizrahi," trying to soften the impact of the shock:

"So what happened anyway? She isn't the first to leave her religion... nor the last."

But "Haroush" said, fighting a feeling of bitterness and disappointment:

"But guys... whoever has no loyalty to their religion... has no loyalty to anyone."

Those present agreed with his words... some with a nod of the head... and others with incomprehensible muttering.

The atmosphere was tense...

The song playing on the "radio" ended, and the announcer's voice rang out introducing the next song... And as happens in perfectly plotted stories... the announcer chose a song by the singer "Leila Mourad"...

"Lanshano's" hand reached quickly to the radio set placed on the shelf...

And he turned it off.

Silence returned to blanket the café. Nothing could be heard except the clacking of backgammon pieces (qishat), the rattle of dice (zahr) hitting the wooden boards, the bubbling of water in the belly of a *shisha* (hookah), and the whispers of some patrons, interspersed with lifeless laughs.

Suddenly, someone shouted:

"Turn on the radio, Lanshano!"

"No radio today."

"Well, what's our fault that you turn this place into a funeral home for us?"

Lanshano shouted back, resisting an overwhelming feeling of anger exploding within him:

"By God, I am free to do what I want in my own café... I'll turn it into a funeral if I want to. And frankly, guys, whoever doesn't like it is welcome to go sit in another café."

Then he continued, directing his speech to his errand boy:

"Boy, Azzouz... take that picture down from here."

He pointed to the wall, where a large, colored portrait of the artist "Leila Mourad" hung inside a gilded wooden frame.

The sun set on that day, and the intensity of the debate in the cafés and on the corners of the alleys calmed down. People returned to their homes, swept away by the current of their daily problems, which distanced them slightly from the event that had nearly driven them out of their minds all day.

The next morning... people in the neighborhood passed around a strange story. They said that a taxi stopped after midnight in front of the "Ibn Maimon" synagogue. "Leila Mourad" stepped out of it, draped in a black cloak... hiding her facial features behind large black sunglasses. She entered the synagogue, visited the tomb of "Ibn Maimon," and then asked the *Shamash* (caretaker) of the synagogue to recite some prayers for the soul of her father, Zaki Mourad.

The story spread quickly everywhere... and reached every house. The frowning faces lit up, and looks of relief peered from their eyes.

In "Lanshano's Café"... the café owner chose an old record from his collection. He placed it on the "gramophone" sitting in the corner of his café, cranked the handle, and then gently and carefully lowered the needle.

The record spun, and from the speaker emanated the voice of Leila Mourad, singing delicately and sweetly the song: *"Hairana Leh Bein El Quloub"* (Why are you confused among hearts).

"Lanshano" turned to his boy "Azzouz," who stood behind the counter preparing a cup of tea for a customer, and said in a voice overflowing with satisfaction:

"Put the picture back in its place, boy Azzouz... dust off the frame and polish the glass real good."

Chapter 7: Samha's House

At the entrance of "Sadd Alley" (Haret Al-Sadd), a few steps away from the "Green" school, "Samha" took her place behind a wooden "cart" resting on two empty crates. On it, she arranged pieces of sweets, chocolate, chewing gum, *simsimiya* (sesame brittle), *baraghit el-sit* (lady's fleas), *nabbout el-ghafir* (watchman's stick), and other types of candy that attracted two things... children, and flies.

"Samha" welcomed the children with her kind, welcoming smile. As for the "flies," she tried to chase them away with a special "fly-whisk" made of fibers and rice straw, which she always held in her hand, her eyes following those annoying insects as they landed and took off.

The neighborhood children would pass by "Samha's cart," filling their eyes with its vibrant colors and shapes. "Samha" was always eager to display on her cart whatever was new in the world of sweets and confections. Barely a new item appeared in the market before you found her rushing to acquire it. Because of this, "Samha's cart" was a rich exhibition of colors, and a playground for the dreams of many children. Some were content to swallow their saliva and sigh in sorrow, like someone saying, "The eye sees... but the hand is short." Others placed their piastres or milliemes into Samha's hand, filling their hands and pockets with the most delicious types of candy.

Despite her old age, "Samha" retained a touch of beauty that the wrinkles of aging failed to obliterate. Her eyes remained the clear blue of a spring sky.

The "old woman" was completely satisfied with her work. This was evident from her cheerful face, which never lost its smile, even when the children gathered around her in deafening noise and shouting. In fact, her smile seemed to grow wider and broader the louder the noise and shouting became.

Most of the children would ask for "sweets" and then not have enough money to pay for them. Her kind heart refused to make the children return the sweets they took... so she asked them to pay tomorrow or the day after. But soon "Samha" would forget... or pretend to forget.

How she wished she had a child to fill her life... She married twice... but fate decreed to deprive her of the blessing of childbirth. She remained barren until old age caught up with her.

Her first husband was a debauched, reckless young man who gave no weight to morals and did not know the fear of God. He made her taste humiliation and degradation, while she endured the hardship with the patience of a good, believing soul.

When she got pregnant by him... he forced her to have an abortion. This abortion was the cause of her sterility.

After five years spent with him in a living hell, he agreed to divorce her, provided she renounce her legal rights.

"Samha" gave up everything... he didn't even allow her to take her personal suitcase of clothes. She left, as the popular saying goes, "from the festival without a single chickpea," suffering from wounds of both soul and body.

Days and months passed... the wounds began to heal, and "Samha" returned to welcome life anew, drawing from her youth and beauty a hope to light her way to a better tomorrow.

She had to find honorable work to live on, especially after her father died suddenly and she found herself responsible for supporting her sick mother. She worked as a "saleswoman" in an exclusive shop selling imported clothes on Fuad Street, frequented only by the wealthy and the "aristocratic" class seeking the latest "models" from London and Paris.

One day, a dignified man entered the shop, gray hair invading his temples. From his eyes looked a deep gaze... combining the warmth of youth with the wisdom of elders.

"Samha" approached him, asking what he needed. The man stood contemplating her with curiosity and admiration, without saying a thing. When he saw the blush of embarrassment rise to her cheeks, he said apologetically:

"Excuse me, miss... your beauty catches the eye."

"Samha" muttered a word of thanks, stumbling in her shyness, trying to escape his kind, deep gaze.

Suddenly something stirred in her chest...

And she felt that her destiny, from this moment on, was tied to this man.

Mr. "David" became a frequent visitor to the shop, buying everything... he didn't need!! For this was the only way he could see her and talk to her.

"Samha" learned that he was twenty years older than her... a wealthy widower, with two sons and a daughter around her age... all of them married... and that he lived alone in a large house in the "Zamalek" district, supervised by a "cook," an "old servant," and a "gardener."

The meetings multiplied... She frankly told him of her painful past. The man gathered her wounds to his chest... and embraced her sorrows in his big heart. The barriers collapsed and melted into a whisper of love, dissolving the twenty years that separated them.

They married... and "Samha" lived with her husband "David" a life full of love and happiness, compensating her for the sorrows and pains of the past.

Only two things... disturbed her peaceful bliss:

Her inability to bear children... and his children boycotting their father ever since he married her.

"David" believed that his children's estrangement would not last long, and that they would eventually accept the reality, clearing hearts and minds, and returning things to normal. But the days proved him wrong. His children stubbornly maintained their hostile stance toward him, depriving him of seeing his grandchildren whom he loved and adored. Because of this, he always seemed melancholic, despite the happiness he felt by her side.

It hurt "Samha's" heart to see a cloud of sadness in the good man's eyes whenever the children and grandchildren were mentioned. "Samha" wished from the bottom of her heart that she could give her husband a child to cure his loneliness... and compensate him for that painful estrangement he faced from his children.

"Samha" left no doctor or specialist without seeking their help... The doctors performed several surgeries on her, but she remained barren, like a tree uprooted and left to dry out.

"Samha" lived with her husband for twenty years, giving him the best a loving woman could give to a loyal husband.

David died when he was seventy years old.

His will was opened in the presence of his children and his lawyer.

The lawyer read the text of the will:

"I, so-and-so, bequeath, while in my full mental capacity, all my money, financial bonds, and jewelry kept in the banks, to my loyal wife 'Samha', who gave me the happiest days of my life.

I also bequeath to her the house she lives in on Shagarat Al-Durr Street in Zamalek.

As for my children, I bequeath to them the pharmaceutical laboratory located in Helwan... provided they do not have the right to sell or mortgage it before my grandchildren reach the age of majority."

The man's children were furious... They filed a lawsuit before the "Mixed Courts" demanding the cancellation of the will, claiming their father wrote it under the influence of his wife, who exploited his old age, his illness, and his need for her, pushing him to deprive his children of their legal right to his money, which was estimated at one hundred thousand pounds.

The execution of the will was suspended...

The funds in the banks were frozen...

And the (house) was placed under judicial receivership until a final ruling was made on the lawsuit.

"Samha" found no reason to stay in her house in "Zamalek," so she returned to the neighborhood where she was born and raised. She rented a modest apartment in "Sadd Alley," and accustomed herself to deprivation and patience.

As if fate wanted to increase its cruelty and stubbornness, the lawsuit proceedings dragged on. The case was postponed dozens of times. Three years passed, and the case was still drowning in a sea of endless pleadings, memos, and deliberations.

"Samha" spent all the money and personal belongings she had to sustain herself, and began living on a monthly stipend provided by the judicial receiver, which barely covered the necessities of life—she, who was accustomed to a life of luxury and comfort.

But her pride forbade her from resorting to resolving the dispute through a settlement and agreement with the heirs. The case became a matter of stubbornness... pride, and defiance.

One summer day in 1945, "Samha" traveled to "Al-Mahalla" (Damanhur) to visit the shrine of "Sidi Abu Hasira." In front of his shrine, which believers of all religions make pilgrimage to, "Samha" stood washing the wounds of her sad heart with her tears, and on her lips was a plea akin to a prayer:

"O righteous sage... by the right of the patriarchs and prophets... Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob... grant me patience and solace, return peace to my soul, and help me bear the days."

That very night... "Samha" saw in a dream a crying child. She hugged him to her chest and gave him a piece of candy... Immediately he stopped crying, and his bright smile returned to his face.

When "Samha" woke from her sleep, she realized that "Sidi Abu Hasira" had placed upon her shoulders the mission of making children happy. And is there anything that makes a child's heart happier than a piece of candy?

And so "Samha" found herself one day taking her place in front of a wooden "cart" resting on two empty crates. On it, she arranged pieces of candy... chocolate... chewing gum... *simsimiya*... *nabbout el-ghafir*... and other types of sweets that attracted children... and flies.

Most of the children would ask for candy and not have enough to pay for it... and her kind heart refused to make the children return the "candy" they took... so she would ask them to pay tomorrow... or the day after. And the children would forget... and "Samha" would also forget, or pretend to forget.

Until a day came when "Samha" was struck by an incurable disease that confined her to bed, leaving her unable to move her body.

The children would go to her house, stand in front of her bed, and ask her: "When will you return to selling candy, Samha?"

And "Samha" would stay silent... but her eyes filled with tears.

When her lawyer came to her one day to inform her that she had won the case, and that the court had upheld the legality of the will, "Samha" felt that her days in this life were numbered.

"Samha" dictated her will to her lawyer:

"Half of the estate shall be distributed to the grandchildren of my late husband... He deprived them of their right in a moment of anger, but he loved them an indescribable love. As for the other half, I bequeath it to build an orphanage bearing the name of my late husband."

"Samha" died... and the orphanage was built...

Days later, a sign was placed on its door that read "David's Orphanage."

But the people in the neighborhood called it...

"Samha's House"...

Chapter 8: Abu Lihaf

All the residents of the neighborhood knew him, and they called him "Abu Lihaf" (Father of the Quilt/Blanket). We boys, however, called him "Abu Shama'a," meaning the owner of the clothes rack. Though the two names differed, they pointed to the same meaning; "Abu Lihaf" used to wear on his body every old *galabiya*, shirt, and coat that benefactors gave him, as if he were a moving clothes rack upon which clothes were hung.

Whenever someone gave "Abu Lihaf" a *galabiya* or a shirt, he quickly wore it over his existing clothes, until it too disappeared beneath another *galabiya* or shirt given by a new benefactor. His attire became like a worn-out quilt (Lihaf), from which dangled rags of clashing colors and shapes.

"Abu Lihaf" never abandoned this outfit. He walked, ate, slept, and sat in his "Lihaf," never changing or replacing it, even on holidays. All he would do was put a loose white coat over this Lihaf, which he kept for such occasions, and then strut proudly through the streets of the neighborhood, so people knew the man was going to the synagogue to pray. As soon as the holiday ended, "Abu Lihaf" folded his white coat and returned to walking in his tattered Lihaf, indifferent to the looks of pity and mockery that followed him everywhere.

Although he had passed his youth by stages and suffered from poverty and deprivation, living on whatever money and food people gave him in charity, he had a strong build and good health. He rarely complained of illness or ailment, and rarely missed his spot where he spent his days: at the door of Master "Eliyahu's" shop, the owner of the manual coffee grinder where the neighborhood residents ground their uniquely flavored coffee beans.

Since Eliyahu was blind, he found comfort in conversing with "Abu Lihaf," who brought him neighborhood news and world events, gleaned from old newspapers and magazines left by café patrons on tables and chairs.

The neighborhood boys were afraid to provoke him because of his quick temper. If "Abu Lihaf" got angry... the foundations of the houses shook, and the windows rattled under the weight of his resounding screams. Even the café patrons would stop their conversations, which turned into laughing whispers whenever "Abu Lihaf's" voice broke free from its restraints.

The words shot from his throat like a sweeping torrent... sometimes clear, and other times incomprehensible. It was a bizarre mix of classical and colloquial Arabic... His voice would rise and erupt sometimes like volcanic fever... then calm down and drop to the chill of ice. Just like a brilliant actor playing the lead role in a Shakespearean play, "Abu Lihaf" would say everything... and say nothing. He would pour his wrath upon the infidels, the gamblers, and those who consume the wealth of orphans and the poor... then transition suddenly and without introduction to describing the charms of women, and flirting with their behinds, which, according to him, are the bliss of the world and the delight of souls.

Then he would revert to the tone of a guiding preacher, promising those who rebel against God the torment of Hell and a miserable destiny, supporting his words with verses from the Torah or verses from the Quran. Sometimes he would resort to verses of poetry he memorized from Abu Al-Alaa Al-Maarri or Al-Mutanabbi, delivering them with extreme verbal pomp, highlighting the music of the meter and rhythm. Finally, he would conclude his "rhetorical carnival" with an improvised *Zajal* (colloquial poem) inspired by the situation and its requirements. Sometimes this inspiration was a loaf of bread, or a plate of "Foul Medames" bestowed upon him by one of God's servants.

Truth be told, the man's memory retained much of what he had learned in school. He had completed primary education in a day when its curriculum gave the student a bit of everything and qualified him to carry the title of "intellectual."

The neighborhood residents considered "Abu Lihaf" an intellectual despite his madness.

We boys, however, considered him "mad" despite his intellect.

We admired him and feared him at the same time. We used to try to draw him into conversation to learn just one reason that would explain the secret of his strange behavior, but in vain. The man insisted on ignoring his past and refusing to delve into his personal secrets.

Whenever we asked the adults, they told us: "The poor man went crazy from his wife's mistreatment of him." When we continued to ask: "And where is his wife?" some would say "She died," while others confirmed she left the neighborhood to a distant place no one knows.

We were young then... and we believed what we were told. Until we grew up and learned the truth... that his real name was "Youssef," who in his youth married a beautiful woman whom he loved with a passion that possessed his soul and emotions. He spent all the money and real

estate he inherited from his father on her, until he owned nothing but his meager salary from his humble government job.

One day, the man returned home early, only to find another man in his wife's bed. He felt a tremor shake his body... and a biting cold course through his limbs. He began putting over his body every blanket, cover, and bedsheet his hands could reach... trying to fend off the invading cold crushing his bones, choking the last flutter of warm love that lived in his heart.

From that day on, he wore everything over everything... *galabiyas*... coats... shirts... socks... anything, anything that could protect him from the cold of memories.

Whenever "Abu Lihaf" felt the grip of memories knocking on his emotions, he let out his thunderous voice, pouring his wrath upon the infidels, the gamblers, and those who consume the wealth of orphans and the poor... then transitioning suddenly and without introduction to describing the charms of a woman who is...

When "Abu Lihaf" died, and the news of his death spread among the neighborhood residents... seven shrouds gathered in the "Taharah" (purification) house, donated by benefactors from the neighborhood to wrap his body.

"Ezra" the undertaker commented: "Even in his death, he wanted them to bundle him in a 'Lihaf' (quilt) of shrouds."

Then he fell silent for a moment and added:

"As if his bones still feel the cold of betrayal."

Chapter 9: The Bracelet

"Umm Youssef" lowered the "bundle" (Surra) she carried on her head and threw it on the floor. Then she said, panting:

"Curse these stairs... and whoever built them... this is something that destroys the body... I know what made you live on the fourth floor, Mrs. Mary."

The lady of the house said with a welcoming smile:

"Sit down and rest, Umm Youssef."

"Umm Youssef" said, spreading out on the carpet of the room, her chest still heaving rapidly from the effort she exerted climbing to the fourth floor:

"Where is the rest, Mrs. Mary? This job of ours, by your life, has nothing but heartache and struggles... and I only wish it pleased people."

"What can you do, Umm Youssef... earning a living requires this."

"Umm Youssef" sighed and said in a sad voice, as if addressing herself:

"God rest your soul, Abu Youssef... he used to carry me on his head and never let me need a single thing."

"Mary" wanted to change the course of the conversation so "Umm Youssef" wouldn't continue listing her troubles, so she said:

"Would you like me to make you a cup of coffee, Umm Youssef?"

"Umm Youssef" said, while picking at the knot of the "bundle" with her fingertips:

"No, thank you kindly... The sun has set, and I left Youssef alone."

The lady of the house took her seat on the "Istanbul sofa," while "Umm Youssef" continued her speech, saying:

"I brought you the dozen handkerchiefs, the wool socks... and the frankincense (Luban Dakar)."

"And the 'Moghat' drink I asked for?"

"The 'Moghat' in the market didn't please me... frankly, it's adulterated... Sister, they adulterate everything these days."

"But I relied on you, Umm Youssef."

"And by your life, I am going to 'Al-Ghouriya' tomorrow specifically to get you the 'Moghat'."

"Umm Youssef" continued, untying the last knot in the "bundle":

"Do I have anyone more precious than you, Mrs. Mary? You are the goodness and the blessing."

She opened the "bundle" and began taking out her merchandise, displaying it to the lady of the house.

This bundle was her capital, and her only source of livelihood. She carried it on her head, moving with it from one house to another. The women of the neighborhood would buy from it what they needed of handkerchiefs, socks, and fabrics, which "Umm Youssef" scavenged from the remnants of factories and shops to sell at cheap prices. She would make a few piastres of profit to sustain herself and provide the necessities of life for her son "Youssef," whom she cared for since he was a baby after his father died. Today he had become a boy, stepping towards his thirteenth year, cooling her chest... and filling her life with hope, light, and solace...

"Umm Youssef," or "Rachel," grew up among three sisters in a poor home that time had betrayed. It deprived the home of a provider to care for it, and gave it a "mother" suffering from a mental illness that stripped her of all sense of responsibility. She left her four daughters to the

mercy of fate and the care of Jewish charities. Three of them learned the trade of sewing and embroidery... graduated... settled for a simple life... and married.

As for "Rachel," she was by nature a romantic girl. She leaned towards imagination... dreaming of a handsome knight, riding a white horse, descending to her from a distant place, holding a bouquet of "narcissus" flowers, to carry her to a grand palace... all gold... and silk. Therefore, she found no desire within herself to learn a trade to help her face life. She left school when she was fourteen years old and worked as a "servant" in the house of a wealthy man from the neighborhood.

Three years passed... and beauty was generous in its gifts to her. Her femininity blossomed, and she became a delight to the eyes and hearts... And she waited for the knight of her dreams. But the "knights" of the neighborhood were dreaming of money... and lineage. As for beauty, its market was not booming among those seeking wealth.

"How much is this, Umm Youssef? ... Umm Youssef!!"

"Umm Youssef" pulled herself out of the whirlpool of memories, realizing she was still in "Mrs. Mary's" house, with piles of merchandise scattered here and there on the carpet... while the lady of the house examined a piece of fabric she wanted to buy, asking for its price:

"How much is this piece of fabric, Umm Youssef?"

"Whatever you pay, Mrs. Mary."

"Is 25 piastres good?"

"By your life, it cost me 28 piastres... this is three and a quarter meters."

"I'll pay you 26 piastres."

"Umm Youssef" sighed and said:

"Take it, madam, and congratulations to you."

Then she added while gathering her scattered merchandise:

"But do me a favor, don't tell anyone I sold it to you at this price..."

"Umm Youssef" gathered her merchandise, tied the "bundle," and carried it on her head... Then she left the house.

When she reached the outskirts of the alley where her house was located, a faint light glowing from the kitchen greeted her. She realized her son "Youssef" was still waiting for her return, and her heart felt at ease... and her soul calmed.

As soon as she opened the door, the voice of "Youssef" chanting the verse of unification (The Shema) from the prayer book reached her ears:

"Hear, O Israel... The Lord is our God, the Lord is One."

She remembered that her son was preparing to celebrate his coming of age, his "Bar Mitzvah," in a few weeks, and that he went to "Rabbi Binyamin" every Tuesday so he could teach him the principles of prayer, and show him how to lay the "Tefillin," which contains the verse of unification enclosed in leather straps, binding it around his arm and above his forehead—a sign of his connection to the commandments of the Torah, which must always be before his eyes... remembering them at all times and in all places.

The voice of "Youssef" reached her, reciting with faith and reverence what is written in the Torah:

"And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto My commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, that I will give the rain of your land in its season... that thou mayest gather in thy corn... and I will give grass in thy fields for thy cattle, and thou shalt eat and be satisfied..."

"Youssef" stopped reciting, as he felt his mother's footsteps approaching. He kissed the prayer book, closed it, and put it in its place. Then he got up to embrace his mother with longing and warmth, having missed her all day.

"Youssef" felt tears falling from her eyes, so he asked her anxiously:

"What's wrong, Mama? Did someone upset you?"

"Never, my son. I am crying out of my joy... this is the day I wished for. To see you grown up, wearing the 'Tefillin,' and becoming a man."

"Youssef" said, patting his mother's head with sympathy and tenderness:

"I want you to be pleased with me."

"My heart and my Lord are pleased with you, Youssef, my son."

"Youssef" seized these emotional moments that swelled in his mother's chest, and said pleadingly:

"So, you're finally going to buy me the suit you promised me?"

The mother hugged him to her chest and said:

"The suit, the watch, and the *Tallit* (a special shawl worn by worshippers). And I will also throw you a big party where you invite all your friends, God willing."

"Youssef" said sympathetically:

"But this will cost you a lot, and we don't have money."

"Umm Youssef" said, wiping her tears with her hands:

"Don't carry that worry, my son... God is great."

Then she added in a voice overwhelmed by maternal tenderness:

"Get up and eat a bite, my darling, so you can sleep and wake up early for your school."

When "Youssef" fell deep asleep, swimming in happy dreams, with the new suit... the elegant watch... and the table brimming with the most delicious types of food and sweets... "Umm Youssef" got up, opened a side "drawer" at the bottom of her ancient wooden "wardrobe," and slid her hand between pieces of old clothes and tattered rags. She pulled out a small box made of wood covered with velvet, untied its ribbon, then lifted the lid...

Inside the box was a gold "bracelet" in the shape of a snake... its eyes were rubies, glowing in the dark...

"Umm Youssef" contemplated the bracelet with love, cherishing, and longing... The memories took her back fourteen years... the day she met the knight of dreams. He was not on a white horse... and he did not bring her a bouquet of "narcissus" flowers... Rather, he brought her his white, pure heart... his fresh youth... and a small carpentry "workshop" in the Sakalba alley.

She was just past twenty-two... and "Yaqub" was twenty-seven years old... They married... and he presented her with this gold "bracelet" as a wedding gift.

She lived with him for a whole year in overwhelming happiness... which almost made her forget the misery and deprivation she had endured. She gave birth to "Youssef," a beautiful baby boy who filled their lives with light, hope... and spring.

But the tragic fate lay hidden behind the light... and the hope... and the spring.

Just as flowers have a short lifespan... so was the life of her young husband.

Yaqub died in a horrific collision accident... and "Rachel" found herself caring for an orphaned infant in the cradle. The world closed in on her and her son... but she refused to remarry... and decided to dedicate her life to her son "Youssef." She worked as a "servant" in the houses of some wealthy people for a period of time, then carried the "bundle" of clothes on her head... moving with it from one house to another... offering her merchandise to the women of the neighborhood... earning meager piastres... to sustain herself... and ensure the necessities of life for her son "Youssef."

Despite the poverty, destitution, and the black days she went through, "Rachel" did not part with her gold bracelet. She hid it in a small box... tucked among her old clothes. Whenever her

sorrows stirred... she returned to it... seeking within it the memories of the most beautiful days of her life.

And now "Youssef" had become a boy and would become a man in weeks... after he placed the "Tefillin" around his arm, and would alone bear the responsibility for his actions before his Creator.

Her eyes welled with tears... and her tears brought her back to her reality. She placed the "bracelet" in the box... and returned it to its place in the clothes closet.

When the sun of the following day was about to set... and "Menashe Sassoon," the jeweler, prepared to close his shop in Al-Sikka Al-Jadida, to go perform the evening prayer (Maghrib) in the "Amshati" synagogue in the Jewish Quarter, "Umm Youssef" entered the shop carrying the gold bracelet. She presented it to him... and asked him to buy it.

"Menashe Sassoon" knew "Umm Youssef" very well, as she frequently visited their house to sell his wife fabrics, clothes, and spices.

"Menashe" was a believing man, who upheld the duties of the Sharia and persisted in performing prayers every day. He carried within his chest a merciful heart... and a generous soul. Therefore, the people in the neighborhood loved him, trusted him... and respected his word.

"Menashe Sassoon" contemplated the gold bracelet for a moment... then raised his eyes and asked "Umm Youssef":

"Why do you want to sell this 'bracelet', Umm Youssef?"

"Umm Youssef" said, fighting her tears:

"If it were up to me, I wouldn't want to part with it, because it is a precious memory of my late husband... but I cannot break the boy's heart... I promised him I would throw him a party on the day he wears the 'Tefillin,' and buy him a new suit and a watch... and make him happy..."

She dried her tears then said:

"Do I have anyone else but him, Khawaja Menashe? He is poor and an orphan... and joy hasn't entered our house since the day his late father died."

"Menashe" opened the safe... took out a stack of banknotes, and pushed it to "Umm Youssef," saying:

"Here you go, Umm Youssef... here is the price of the bracelet... fifty pounds."

"Umm Youssef" took the money, and tucked it into her bosom. Then she left the shop, muttering incomprehensible words of thanks... and joy lighting up her eyes.

Mr. "Menashe" examined the *brass* bracelet, plated with a thin layer of gold... which was not worth more than a few piastres. He shook his head, placed it in his pocket... closed the shop... and went to perform the evening prayer in the nearby synagogue... wearing a smile indicative of profound satisfaction.

Chapter 10: The Princess

A small shop in "Oven Alley" (Darb Al-Furn). On the wall are some shelves of old wood, upon which are stacked tin cans, cloth bags, and some old, dust-covered volumes.

In the middle of the shop is a manual "grinder," fixed on a wooden base. "Eliyahu" sits at it throughout the daylight hours, turning it with his strong arms. Every now and then, he stops briefly to push "coffee beans" with his fingers into the hole of the axis upon which the grinding "gears" rotate. When the grinder's bowl empties of beans, the man reaches his hand toward the bottom of the base, pulls out a wooden "drawer," and empties its contents of "ground coffee" into its special tin. Then he secures the lid tightly over it, so the fresh "coffee" isn't exposed to the air, which would spoil its flavor.

"Eliyahu" knew how to master his craft, and was keen on earning the satisfaction of his "customers," which made him an object of trust among the neighborhood's people. And no wonder... the man had been doing this job for over twenty years. He mastered and perfected it until he could grind a "pound" of coffee without dropping a single "bean"... despite being blind.

"Eliyahu" did not carry a "stick" to aid him in his walking, unlike other blind people. Rather, he took the right side of the road, and walked with his head held high, his face pointing straight ahead just as the sighted walk.

If he heard the sound of a "cart" or an "automobile" approaching him, he stopped walking until it passed him, then resumed his walk, with steady steps... the smile barely leaving his lips.

The man recognized people by their voices... indeed, he was capable of distinguishing some of them merely by their footsteps, or their manner of speaking. If he heard a woman's voice talking in the street, he turned his face toward the sound, called her by her name, and then said to her reproachfully:

"What happened, Mrs. So-and-so? Have you stopped drinking coffee? Two months have passed and your feet haven't stepped into my shop?"

Often, "Eliyahu" carried the tin of ground coffee himself to the houses of its owners. He knew all the alleys and lanes of the neighborhood... and even knew the way to every house in them.

"Eliyahu" was born in the Jewish Quarter fifty years ago. Fate decreed that he lose his sight as a five-year-old child, following a purulent inflammation that was neglected in its treatment. When he reached the age of seven, they enrolled him in a school for the blind, where he learned how

to use his fingers to identify objects, and convey to his imagination their various images and shapes. He also learned to read and write in "Braille."

"Eliyahu" grew up blind, moving from one manual job to another, until he finally settled in this shop, making it a coffee "grinder," earning his daily bread with great difficulty.

The man possessed a proud, dignified soul. Despite his poverty... his destitution... and the loss of his sight, he refused to accept charity or handouts from anyone.

His pride forbade him from reaching out his hand to charitable institutions to collect the monthly "stipend" allocated from "Waqf" (endowment) funds for the poor and disabled like him.

And perhaps the most amazing thing is that he refused assistance even from my mother, who was his sister... his blood sister.

Such was the nature of my uncle "Eliyahu," the day I knew him as a seven-year-old child, in my first years of primary school.

My relationship with him was limited to passing by his shop every day on my way to school, bidding him good morning, and then asking him the traditional question:

"Is there any service I can do for you, Uncle?"

And I always received the same answer:

"No, my son, I don't need anything... you just work hard in your studies... and I stand by my promise to you: if you get your primary school certificate, I will buy you a precious gift."

The promised gift didn't matter to me as much as it mattered to secretly reach my hand into the grinder's bowl, pick up a few coffee beans... grind them with my teeth, and suck their beloved bitterness, in a state of euphoric *Kaif* (bliss), as I hurried my steps toward my school, which wasn't very far from the shop.

"Eliyahu" lived in a small room, in an old building in "Oven Alley" they called "The Malja" (The Shelter).

This "Shelter" consisted of two floors, containing about twenty rooms, built specifically forty years ago to house the poor and destitute of the neighborhood. The building was old and eroding... cracks filled its moisture-saturated walls, and it looked ready to collapse at any moment. Yet its "residents" continued to return to its dilapidated rooms, spending their nights there, and when daylight broke, each of them went out seeking a bite of food.

One day, what people expected finally happened. It was a noon afternoon, when the neighborhood residents heard a massive boom, accompanied by a thick cloud of dust that almost blocked the vision and choked the breath.

"Abu Lihaf," sitting at the door of "Eliyahu's" shop, shouted:

"O You whose kindness is hidden, save us from what we fear... it seems the Day of Judgment has begun, Uncle Eliyahu."

"Eliyahu" stopped grinding the coffee, pricked up his ears for a moment, then said:

"It is the 'Shelter.' The cursed thing has finally collapsed..."

Then he added in a tone tinged with anxiety: "I felt it shaking this morning, so I advised the residents to leave it immediately... All I hope is that no one was hurt."

As if heaven wanted to fulfill "Eliyahu's" hope, none of the shelter's residents were hurt, as they all happened to be outside the building when it suddenly collapsed and became a pile of rubble, dust, and stones.

The Jewish Community Council met hastily... and issued a statement, calling on the neighborhood residents to open their homes, and shelter dozens of poor people who had become homeless... until another place could be found to house them.

It was natural that my mother would host her brother "Eliyahu" in our house, and allocate him one of the four rooms of the house.

"My uncle's" room was adjacent to my room... despite this, I hardly felt his presence in our house. He was accustomed to leaving the house early every morning before I woke up, and returning to the house after I had already gone to bed.

One night, I woke up to the sound of playing and singing coming from the large balcony that connected my room to my uncle's room. Curiosity pushed me to enter the balcony. I saw my uncle in his loose white *galabiya*, sitting cross-legged on a piece of "carpet"... leaning his back against the wall. Pressed to his chest was an "Oud," whose strings he was caressing with his fingertips, while chanting in a sweet voice the song: *"Qamar Loh Layali"* (A moon that has nights)...

I stood for a moment, listening to the singing, captivated. This was the first time I saw "my uncle" playing the "Oud" and heard him sing.

It seems he sensed my presence, because he suddenly stopped singing, and asked in a low voice, trying to make it sound cheerful:

"Who is there?"

I said, still captivated by what I saw and heard:

"It is me, Uncle."

He asked apprehensively:

"Did the sound of my singing wake you up?"

I lied so as not to bother him:

"No, never... I woke up on my own, I felt thirsty."

His face lit up, and he handed me the clay "Qullah" (water jug) he made sure to keep on the balcony to cool its water:

"Here, drink from my Qullah... its water is scented with orange blossom water (Ma' Zahr)."

I wasn't feeling thirsty... but I took a sip of its water, and returned it to him. He drank from it audibly, then burped... and said as he returned the Qullah to its place:

"Now return to your bed, for tomorrow you must wake up early for your school."

I said to him evasively:

"I thought someone left the 'radio' open, and that the voice was that of 'Abdel Wahab'."

He said, flattered:

"Did you like the singing?"

I said:

"I didn't know you could sing so well, Uncle. And where did you learn to play the Oud?"

My uncle fell silent for a moment, then sighed and said:

"It is a long, broad story..."

I said, as curiosity drove the last trace of sleep from my eyes:

"I want to hear it."

He said:

"But the hour is late... and the story is long..."

I pleaded:

"I am very eager to hear it."

A dreamy smile spread across his lips, and he passed his fingers over the strings of his "Oud" as if drawing from its notes memories dear to himself and his heart. Then he put the "Oud" aside, took a pack of "cigarettes" from his pocket, took one, and lit it... He blew the smoke into the air accompanied by the sigh of a defeated man, then said:

"She is the one who taught me to play the Oud, my son."

"Who is she?"

"My princess..."

"What princess?"

"The one I love... and who loves me."

I asked in amazement:

"There is a princess who loves you?"

"And she receives me every day in her grand palace."

"And when do you go to her?"

"After I finish my work at the shop, bathe, and change my clothes."

I asked again:

"And how do you go to her grand palace?"

"The driver of her private car waits for me at the entrance of the alley, every evening at a specific hour, and takes me to her."

"And where is her palace located?"

"Somewhere on a high hill overlooking the Nile, which no one can reach."

"And is she truly beautiful?"

"Blessed be the Merciful in His creation... I have seen many women, but my eyes have never fallen on one with such beauty and magic."

"My uncle" fell silent for a moment, then added, as if trying to push away the doubts that must have crossed my mind:

"My 'princess' is a generous lady. I have told her about you a lot... and when she learned that you are diligent in your studies, she sent you this bag full of sweets with me..."

"My uncle" slipped his hand into his pocket and took out a bag of colored paper, placed it in my hand and said:

"Open it, to see for yourself."

I opened the bag, and lo and behold, it was full of "Mulabbas" (sugared almonds) and pieces of "chocolate."

Surprise tied my tongue. The shock was greater than the mind of a child my age could bear. I looked at my uncle, half believing, half disbelieving... But my doubts soon evaporated with the first piece of chocolate that melted in my mouth.

And I began to believe everything "my uncle" told me about his beautiful princess, who knew how to sing, play, and dance... and who, when she danced and sang, scattered flowers around her... pearls... coral... emeralds... pieces of "chocolate"... and "Mulabbas"...

And every night, after the people of the house went to their rooms, I would sneak from my room to the balcony where "Uncle Eliyahu" sat. He transported me to his magical world with his engaging style... and his deep voice, which rose and fell according to the development of the events.

When he narrated the stories of his beautiful "princess," he didn't neglect a single detail. He described things so you could see them with your own eyes... and talked about people so you felt as if you knew them beforehand.

And if he removed the veil from the face of his "princess," a shining full moon would greet you, adorned with two black eyes in the depth of the night, guarded by kohl-darkened eyelashes... beneath which slept cheeks of rose and apple... musk... and amber. If she smiled, the world laughed... and if she cried, the sky rained.

And I listened to his stories with all the curiosity, longing, and imagination of childhood. The pieces of candy were no longer the only thing tempting me to listen to him, for I had come to approach his tales just as King "Shahryar" approached the stories of "Scheherazade."

Nine months passed, and a new "Shelter" was built on the exact same land where the old "Shelter" had stood. My uncle "Eliyahu" moved to live in it, despite my father's insistence that he stay with us.

"Eliyahu" insisted on living in the "Shelter" so as not to be a burden on anyone... even the people closest to him.

I grieved the departure of "my uncle" just as much as I grieved being deprived of the pleasure I found in listening to the stories of his "princess."

Two years after he left our house, my uncle was struck by sudden paralysis that gave him only a few days to live.

The family went out to escort his body to its final resting place. Walking behind the coffin were a large number of the neighborhood's residents who knew "Eliyahu" or who were bound to him by ties of affection and friendship.

As soon as we reached the courtyard of the "Synagogue" where funeral prayers are usually held, I saw a black Rolls Royce car stop at the entrance of the courtyard. Out stepped a slender woman... wearing elegant clothes indicating wealth, and placing a black silk veil over her face.

The lady stepped forward, followed by the driver of her car in his "navy blue" suit with shiny brass buttons, carrying a wreath of white flowers.

It seemed the impact of the surprise on the mourners was stronger than their curiosity, for tongues went mute... and a strange silence reigned over the place.

The lady placed the wreath on the coffin... and stood for a moment with her head bowed. Then she lifted the veil from her face to wipe a tear that welled up in her eyes.

And I saw a shining full moon, adorned with two black eyes in the depth of the night, guarded by "kohl-darkened" eyelashes, beneath which slept cheeks of rose and apple... and I saw the sky crying.

The lady returned to her car... and the car drove off, leaving the courtyard, while the eyes of the mourners followed it in astonishment and curiosity.

Whispers rose among the mourners, and people asked:

"Who could this lady be?"

No one knew her...

But I... I knew her.